

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DÉJÀ VU

Vernon M. Neppe, The Psychology of Déjà Vu: Have I Been Here Before? Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press, 1983.

In the déjà vu experience the individual has an uncanny feeling of familiarity which is inappropriate in that context. One of the most common forms of the experience involves the impression that a particular place seems familiar, yet the experient knows that he/she has never been there before. Some writers have been inclined to classify such an experience as inherently parapsychological. This view is rather presumptive, but certainly it is legitimate to countenance parapsychological mechanisms as hypothetical accounts of the experience. For example, in some cases the feeling of familiarity conceivably could stem from an unrecalled prior instance of precognition, extrasensory perception or out-of-body experience, or from largely inaccessible memories of a previous incarnation. Conversely, if the bases of déjà vu are appreciated, they might permit greater insight into and clarification of certain subjectively parapsychological experiences such as spontaneous precognition and reincarnation memories. In these respects, therefore, the déjà vu experience is of some interest to psi researchers.

Vernon Neppe's book The Psychology of Déjà Vu should find a receptive audience among readers of Psi Research and more specifically among parapsychological researchers. Although there is a sizeable literature on déjà vu (as is attested by Neppe's quite extensive bibliography), there has been meager theoretical and empirical progress on the phenomenon in recent years. This volume is a welcome endeavor to redress the situation and indeed it is said to be the first book (as distinct from journal articles and unpublished theses) devoted wholly to déjà vu.

The initial task undertaken by Neppe in his monograph is the analysis of definitional issues. It is clear, for example, that the inappropriate feeling of familiarity is

not specific to visual impressions as would be implied by the term déjà vu (literally, "already seen"). Neppe proceeds to list a score of terms, including déjà entendu ("already heard") and déjà rencontre ("already met"), which might be employed to differentiate among the contexts of a more general phenomenon. These terms do have merit in alerting researchers not to limit their inquiry to purely visual impressions of places and events, as has been done so frequently in past investigations. At the same time it is apparent that there is an unfortunate, if unwitting, tendency in the literature to generalize the expression "déjà vu" to any sensory modality and context, and thus the adoption of a broad term such as "déjà experience" is warranted.

In this vein Neppe (p. 3) elects to define the déjà vu experience as "any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience with an undefined past." With its primary emphasis upon the element of inappropriate familiarity, this definition may strike some readers as casting the conceptual net a little too widely. For example, the definition does not assume that the particular situation has never before been encountered by the individual; that is, the experience need not be erroneous, but simply evocative of the strange sense of familiarity which is not characteristic of the person's usual impression of the situation. Possibly just as problematic is Neppe's effort to distinguish between precognitive and déjà experiences. Thus, in his view, if the experient can recall a dream which corresponds in content to the present experience, the latter should not be regarded as a déjà experience, but as a precognized one. If, on the other hand, the experient has a vague idea that he/she once had such a dream but cannot be more precise in the recollection of its content or of the occasion of its occurrence, the present experience would be accepted by Neppe as falling in the déjà category. In its dependence upon the precision of the experient's memory, this taxonomic differentiation is in some ways an arbitrary one, but it is nonetheless necessary at this early stage of research if all possible causal factors (including that of "forgetting") are to be canvassed.

Neppe then reviews the qualitative characteristics of the déjà experience. This section is systematic and thorough, but also surprisingly brief, again drawing attention to the paucity of our knowledge of the correlates and other features of the experience phenomenology. Theories of the mechanism underlying the phenomenon also are addressed; generally the coverage here is far too condensed and inclined to presume much of the general reader. Cognitive psychologists also may be disappointed to find no account of the experience in terms of the distinction between episodic and semantic memory systems.

The major part of the monograph is devoted to a detailed summary of Neppe's PhD (Med.) survey of déjà experiences among epileptics, schizophrenics, people who acknowledge subjectively paranormal experiences, and otherwise "normal" individuals. The representativeness of each of his samples is highly doubtful, and while Neppe concedes this, he applies to very small sets of data statistical tests which presume random sampling, and engages in detailed discussion of the implications of these data for déjà typology, theory, and clinical practice. The limitations of the research in this respect cannot lightly be dismissed. Be that as it may, as a pilot study Neppe's empirical work has made two major contributions to the field. First, it has raised the possibility that the déjà experience is not a homogeneous phenomenon but might instead be reducible to several distinct "syndromes," each with its own peculiar etiology. (That any of these syndromes correspond to the ones identified by Neppe remains to be demonstrated conclusively.) Second, Neppe has performed an invaluable service to future researchers of the déjà experience by operationalizing various specific aspects of the experience and its potential correlates, and by also developing interview schedules and questionnaires to gather information pertinent to these aspects. For these contributions The Psychology of Déjà Vu will come to be recognized as essential reading for psychologists and parapsychologists contemplating empirical study in the area.

At a technical level the book is indexed with reasonable thoroughness, has an excellent bibliography, and is relatively free from typographical errors. There are some oddities in expression which possibly may reflect the book's South African idiom, and the reliance upon abbreviations and the enumeration of points tend to be excessive. Despite its declared intention to make the material comprehensible to "the intelligent layman" (and presumably to the intelligent laywoman), much of the book still reads like a doctoral thesis.

In summary, Neppe's monograph is hardly as claimed in Professor Lewis Hurt's foreword, "one of the major works of scientific and imaginative genius of our time" (p. xi), but nonetheless it is a substantial publication on its chosen topic and will be appreciated as such by researchers.

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### THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Bruce Greyson & Charles Flynn, eds. The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives. Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1984; 289 pp.

At last there is a comprehensive textbook available in the field of near-death experiences. This book represents a significant departure from all of its predecessors in that it covers the gamut of topics from theory to practice. It will not be for everyone, nor was it intended to be. The textbook pricing structure alone will drive off the casual buyer. Still, it meets a previously unfulfilled need to support the academic community with a quality text addressing this aspect of the burgeoning field of thanatology. Of value to scholars will be the comprehensive bibliographies that accompany many of the articles.